

Chapter 2: Forces of Change: Fusion Politics and the African American Community in Wilmington

The last decade of the nineteenth century dawned with a bright outlook for Wilmington's population. The city's residents, white and black, were experiencing a high degree of prosperity and a vibrant social life – a promotional booklet praised the city's "growing wealth and prosperity which abound on every hand." The prosperity reached into the African American community as it celebrated success in a variety of ways. St. Stephen's, one of the city's largest African American churches with a congregation of 1,700, celebrated the centennial of the African Methodist Church of the United States in its new sanctuary, constructed and furnished by its members such as Lewis Hollingsworth, Daniel Lee, and Edward Stills.¹

A few blocks away, another large black congregation attended church at Mt. Zion A. M. E. Church. There, in 1888, the congregation heard politically outspoken Reverend Isaiah Aldridge condemn future governor Daniel Russell for comments that he deemed to be an "assault upon an innocent people." Aldridge stipulated that he would not vote for or support candidates that "endorsed what Judge Russell had said about the savage negroes."²

After his sermon, Aldridge wrote in the Wilmington *Morning Star* that he held his political views independent of the larger Republican Party in Wilmington. He held firm to his support of the "honest" Republican ticket despite a warning from "the Bosses" that he should "keep quiet" and vote as expected or he would be fired.³ This window on Wilmington's African American community delineates the overlap among church, civic, economic, and political life in the city. Not only was the politically charged church sermon well attended but it was also publicized in local white newspapers, providing clues as to the political culture of the city and the racial discord simmering beneath the surface.



Governor Daniel Russell
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¹ St. Stephen's new sanctuary celebrated its first major event in 1887 with the anniversary celebration attended by prominent national church leaders. J.S. Reilly, *Wilmington. Past, Present and Future, Embracing Historical Sketches of its Growth and Progress from its Establishment to the Present Time, Together with Outline of North Carolina History* (Wilmington, 1884), 22; Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 104-5.

² Daniel Russell was born in 1845 near Wilmington on his family plantation in Brunswick County. A wealthy planter family, the Russells did not support secession although young Daniel joined the Confederacy for a brief period after graduation from the University of North Carolina. After leaving Confederate service because of stormy relationships

with Confederate officials, Russell became an ardent Republican. For more information on Russell's career, see Jeffrey J. Crow and Robert F. Durden, *Maverick Republican in the Old North State: A Political Biography of Daniel L. Russell*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977); Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 104-5, 114.

³ Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 114-115.